

The Virginia Quarterly Review
Autumn 1968

D-McMillan, Priscilla

A. Stalina, Svetlana

*Soc. 4.01.2 Twenty Letters
— To A Friend*

*Orig. under
Stalin*

SVETLANA ALLILUYEVA

By PRISCILLA JOHNSON McMILLAN

IN the spring of 1967 the daughter of the late Josef Stalin, Svetlana Alliluyeva, touched down at Kennedy airport, solid and smiling, yet somehow an eccentric presence in our midst. A few months later, in October, she published "Twenty Letters to a Friend," the book she had composed while still living in the U.S.S.R. As I think about Svetlana and the current leaders of the Soviet Union, whose actions and attitudes appear to have precipitated her extraordinary defection, the picture that comes to my mind is that of Svetlana on the one hand and the Soviet leaders on the other, each side unable to be anything but true to itself, each imprisoned by laws of its own nature imperfectly understood, each behaving blindly, mechanically, to bring about a consummation neither could consciously have wished for.

But the life of Svetlana Alliluyeva has in fact been studded with signposts, so that her defection, an event that seemed inconceivable on the face of it, turns out in reality to be one of those occurrences psychiatrists call "overdetermined": the action that appears in retrospect to have been inevitable and ordained from the start, provided only that there be the opportunity—and some immediate provocation.

I believe that Svetlana's defection arose out of the feelings she bore both her parents and that by immutable laws of their own being the present leaders of the Soviet Union stumbled into the hapless rôle of surrogates for Stalin, to whose station as father they succeeded.

A few words, first, about the book. In the story of her mother's family, the Alliluyevs, Svetlana has created an allegory of the sufferings of the Soviet people as a whole. She has shown that terrible as it was to be a subject of Stalin